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AUTHOR	Tucker, Donald L.
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ABSTRACT

This study addressed two specific questions regarding Korean students at American colleges and universities. One is a question of accommodation, and the other is a question of orientation: to what extent do we need to change our classroom format and teaching methodology (and types of assignments) to accommodate students from different cultures and countries; and how can we best orient foreign students and assist them in making the transition into the American way of learning? Personal background explaining the author's interest in this issue is provided. Differences in cultural orientation, specifically how differing cultural values determine the form and style of communication, interpersonal behavior and interaction, and ways of learning are examined. Reflections on two specific issues involving essay-writing and scholarly research that confront the American teacher unfamiliar with Asian culture and learning are included, i.e., writing styles and definitions of plagiarism. Four tables contrast American and Korean writing style, classroom interaction and behavior, content of tests and papers, and view of scholarship. Suggestions are offered related to accommodation, orientation, and strategies for assessment. Three simple approaches are recommended--awareness of cultural differences, teacher modeling, and use of several types of interaction activities. Nine interview questions are appended. (Contains 40 references.) (MES)

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Understanding Learning Styles and Study Strategies of Korean Students in American Colleges and Universities

A Research Study with Recommendations for Faculty and Academic Advisors

by

Donald L. Tucker, Ed.D.

Dean of Academic Assessment
Valley Forge Christian College
Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

March 2003

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Understanding Learning Styles and Study Strategies of Korean Students in American Colleges and Universities

"Do not remove a fly from your neighbor's face with a hatchet" (Chinese proverb).

INTRODUCTION

The standard texts of editors Rona F. Flippo and David D. Caverly, *Teaching Reading and Study Strategies at the College Level* and *College Reading and Study Strategy Programs* (1991), cover a wealth of material regarding reading improvement and study strategies for college students. Little attention, however, is given to specific strategies to assist the cross-cultural learner or foreign student studying in the American system. Books on multicultural education generally focus on the appreciation of cultural differences and suggest simplistic ways of increasing "awareness." A mere appreciation of cultural difference does not often translate into any significant adjustment in classroom style, teaching methodology, or accommodation to different learning strategies. How do you really help someone learn if they don't think, read, write, or study in the same way that you do?

More cross-cultural studies to assist instructors in understanding and responding to the unique situation of the international student are needed. Flippo and Caverly admit that "although cross-cultural studies number the fewest, their results have considerable implications (52)." This research addresses two specific questions regarding Korean students. One is a question of accommodation; the other is a question of orientation: (1) To what extent do we need to change

our classroom format and teaching methodology (and types of assignments) to accommodate students from different cultures and countries? (2) How can we best orient foreign students and assist them in making the transition into the American way of learning? The focus here will be specifically on Korean students, but general principles may apply to other groups as well.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

My interest in this issue first began in 1980 when studying "psychological anthropology." I was introduced to the idea that one's perceptions of reality, cognitive processes, and personality are largely framed by the culture in which you are raised. Until then, I assumed that everyone thought like me! More specifically, in 1985, when I became registrar at a small Christian college in the East, one of the portfolios of my job was to oversee the "Korean Extension" school. Here is where my classroom theory faced its first test. Let me share a few of my own observations and experiences.

I found that Korean students did not participate in classroom discussion and rarely (if ever) took any notes from the lectures. They would study for many hours, get up early, stay up late, and usually studied in groups. They would do well on objective tests, but do poorly on essay exams. If possible, they would opt for an oral exam rather than a written one.

When a Korean student came to my office, they would ask about my wife, about my kids, about how things were going, how I was feeling, or other matters unrelated to the academic context. They did not "get to the point" about why they were here. Often, a larger group of younger Koreans would be represented by a "statesman" who spoke on their behalf. If a request was made that I disagreed with and denied, the statesman acted like he did not understand and would ask me again and again. The word "no" seemed to have no real meaning.

In one particular classroom situation, students were given an option to write an original song and record it to fulfill an assignment. One Korean student turned in a recording of a popular and well-known song that she enjoyed singing. When explained to her that the recording would have to be redone and the song must be original, she could not understand why this was necessary. To her, the idea of "original" did not mean "my own song," but rather, "a song sung by me."

The most confusing behavior came in response to grade reports and transcripts. A grade report given to me from the Korean extension never showed a grade of "D" of "F" even when I had the test results and papers that showed this to be the correct grade for a student. In fact, even a grade of "C" was rare. Most grades were "A" or "B". A student whose grades were low somehow disappeared from the course roster kept at the extension school (which meant that my "official" list did not match their list).[1]

DIFFERENCES IN CULTURAL ORIENTATION

In reflecting upon the above scenarios, I now understand that what I previously viewed as learning "problems" were really reflections of differing cultural values. These cultural values determine the form and style of communication, interpersonal behavior and interaction, and ways of learning. These cultural variations impact approaches to writing assignments, the rules of classroom interaction, the style of learning and taking tests, the content of essays and papers, the

[1] Interestingly, a comparison of Asian students (Toupin and Son, 1991), shows a larger number with lower GPAs and more placed on academic probation than their non-Asian counterparts. Subsequently, a marked increase in withdrawals due to medical reasons (and less graduates) is noted. Toupin and Son use this data to point out that the stereotype of Asians as "model students" is inaccurate. However, they fail to account for these findings in terms of culture or language problems that impact academic performance. They even admit this weakness in their own study. *Note*: The Korean extension was discontinued a few years later, although for at least two years afterward grade reports and tuition checks continued to be mailed to our institution; though we repeatedly returned them and explained that the extension was officially disbanded.

expected role of the teacher and of the student, and whether collaboration means "cheating" or simply "helping."

REFLECTIONS ON TWO SPECIFIC ISSUES

Two specific issues involving essay-writing and scholarly research that confront the American teacher unfamiliar with Asian culture and learning are (1) writing styles and (2) definitions of plagiarism. In typical Aristotelian logic, American students are taught to develop a thesis statement, identify supporting ideas, add a few examples, and conclude a written paper with strong arguments based upon this deductive format. In contrast, the Korean student view of acceptable content is different. Korean writing style favors the use of indirection and circular reasoning.[2] The essay begins with inductive arguments and examples rather than a defined "thesis." A difference in the process of reasoning and communicating is clearly evident.

In writing papers or answering essay questions, the American student - in typical deductive logic - will first state the main idea of their argument and follow this with various proofs in a set and organized pattern. Conversely, the Korean student will explain things indirectly, with a pattern of circular reasoning. The Korean essay will begin with a general statement somewhat related to the problem to be discussed. This may be followed by tangential statements loosely related to the idea. Finally, the paper will end with the main point of the argument. To understand what the Korean student is trying to say, the American professor may actually need to read the end of the paper first and then go back to see how other statements are

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[2] This use of indirect communication through examples, stories, and "parables" is also seen in many African cultures and even among autistic individuals. See Del Tarr, *Double Image: Biblical Insights from African Parables* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) and Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism,* foreword by Oliver Sacks (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

related to this. This writing form is easy to understand if the cultural value orientation is taken into account.[3]

The second issue, and the one that causes much consternation among American professors, is that of "plagiarism." I have put plagiarism in quotation marks because I am thinking here of our American definition (which reflects our own value system). It is the American ideal of independence of thought and pursuit of individual interests that defines plagiarism as "stealing."

Abruptness and directness are impolite (even destructive) in the Korean worldview. Relationships are valued and protected. This means that you do not disgrace someone by setting out to immediately prove your point. This politeness will carry over even into persuasive papers. A Korean would not say anything in the paper that would be against someone else. For example, you would not say, "I disagree with the view of professor so-and-so." This would be rude, disrespectful, and even disgraceful.[4]

The concept of keeping an idea to yourself without contributing to the value of the group as a whole is foreign to the Korean worldview. In fact, it would be considered unscholarly (rather than scholarly) to be boastful and say "this is my own idea, you cannot claim it." The cultural value of deference and courtesy preclude the Korean student from directly citing the

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[3] An understanding of "language transfer" can be helpful here. Within one's own culture and language, a person picks up ways of doing things that become natural strategies connected with the linguistic and cultural norms. Negative, as well as positive, transfer strategies, will be displayed. Sometimes, without being consciously aware of it, the foreign student will end up *overtranslating* into English. When this happens it will be necessary to re-learn techniques and strategies that more appropriately adapt to the American context. Here is where universities and colleges that offer English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can assist the foreign student. EAP courses focus on English that is useful for the academic and technical skills required of higher learning (i.e. critical thinking skills of analyzing and synthesizing).

[4] Although not dealing with Korean students, the research on Chinese immigrant students by Betty Lee Sung reinforces this cultural perspective and other cultural conflicts in the classroom setting.

source of his or her information. It would be an affront to the professor to put something in quotation marks and thus embarrass the intelligence of the expert (the teacher). The Korean would be thinking, "the professor will naturally know where this information comes from." And, even if the teacher does not know, you must not embarrass him by pointing this out.

The comparisons below reveal other differences in cultural values and learning behaviors of Korean and American students. Tables 1-4 contrast in parallel columns some marked differences between the typical American[5] and the traditional Korean approach to learning. Recognizing these will assist in developing helpful approaches to teaching and learning.

Table one compares variations seen in writing style and essay content (e.g., deduction versus induction; directness versus indirectness). Table two reveals the contrast in classroom interaction and verbalization (also typical of daily social interactions outside the classroom). Note the differences in cultural values regarding confrontation, competition, independence, and equality. Table three points out different approaches and learned behaviors regarding study, test-taking, and researching for papers or projects. Table four identifies contrary perspectives of what is considered acceptable scholarship.

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[5] By "American" I am referring to the traditional, middle-class, majority population, white value system of pre-World War II America. Although we are more than fifty years removed from WWII, I still see a majority of teachers (and students) whose ethnocentrism continues to exhibit these same characteristics. Admittedly, I am from this context. The school where I teach is predominantly white, with a small mix (approximately 16%) of Black, Hispanic, and Asian students.

Table 1. Contrast Between American and Korean Writing Style

AMERICAN	KOREAN
deductive pattern (general to specific); main idea followed by proofs	inductive pattern; general statement, tangential references, main idea last
reader-based prose (written for someone else to read)	writer-based prose (written for writer only)
get to the point, do not waste words, directness, prove it logically	circular rhetoric, distance between ideas

Table 2. Contrast in Classroom Interaction and Behavior

AMERICAN	KOREAN
informality, casualness	formality, rules of proper behavior
open criticism, confrontation, public disagreement, abrupt, straightforward	harmony, deference, courtesy, nonconfrontational, indirect
individual work, competition, independence of thought and judgment	group work, cooperation, quality of relationships, interrelatedness
equality, your opinion okay	hierarchy, teacher is expert
talk and solve all problems	silence, watch nonverbal (psychic) cues
decisions based on objectivity and merits of the case, emphasis on "efficiency"	weighing of feelings and state of mind of others, "reading of the eyes"

Table 3. Contrast in Content of Tests and Papers

AMERICAN	KOREAN
analytical thinking, introspection	learn facts, memorize information
collaboration is cheating	collaboration is valuable

Table 4. Contrast in View of Scholarship

AMERICAN	KOREAN
young scholar establishes self by proposing new theories and attacking established view of older authorities	do not challenge view of an elder, respect value of age and precedent, wait for one's time and turn
pursue own interests	subordinate personal interests

SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Let me go back now to my original two questions concerning accommodation and orientation: (1) To what extent do we need to change our classroom format and teaching methodology (and types of assignments) to accommodate students from different cultures and countries? (2) How can we best orient foreign students and assist them in making the transition into the American way of learning?

A partial answer to the question of accommodation is reflected in individual faculty attitudes and actions. I have observed many faculty who make some concessions for Korean students (e.g. allowing use of a dictionary to translate unfamiliar words or extra time to complete an examination). But, suggesting that alternative exams be routinely administered as the standard is met with comments such as "I don't have time to make up two different exams" or "well, we can't really adapt everything for everybody." More strongly, some would even say, "they're in America, they'll have to learn to do just like the rest of us."

I want to suggest that a balance can be struck between total accommodation and faculty perceptions that "it's not my problem." Total adaptation in trying to assist or appease someone from another culture will only reinforce negative transfer strategies. It may also lead to

dependence on behavior patterns that are inappropriate or even inferior. At the college and university level the student should be far enough along to recognize that it may be necessary to use some American ways of learning and interacting in conjunction with long-established patterns from the native culture.

Orienting students to the American system is a challenge. A first step here is the simple acknowledgement that there is a difference. How to respond to the differences will involve an assessment of each individual's learning strategies and weaknesses. At the same time, faculty orientation and assistance is essential. This could include (1) basic knowledge about cultural differences and other ways of thinking; (2) self-awareness, including an understanding of one's own attitude and its reflection in ethnocentric responses, as well as awareness of one's own personal thinking and learning style; and (3) development and use of at least some skill in alternative teaching methods to supplement each instructor's basic format.

STRATEGIES FOR ASSESSMENT

I want to offer a few suggestions for approaching assessment in a cross-cultural setting. Lonner and Sundberg (1985) and Barnouw (1979) give suggestions for the use of standardized assessment tools.[6] I will not venture to second-guess their expertise. They suggest traditional, older, and more widely used tests that have been tried with diverse groups. My own suggestion is to balance these written tests with personal interviews and consultation with others who have

[6] For example, they recommend the MMPI or California Personality Inventory (CPI) which have been used successfully with diverse groups. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that most "tests are culturally isomorphic (that is, they are consistent with expectations, educational practices, and so on in the test-originating culture)" (Lonner and Sundberg, 201-202). Different ways of responding due to one's cultural style may reduce the reliability of the test. With Koreans, it is impolite to disagree, so they might agree to every question on the test. Remember, every assessment instrument has limitations. None are perfect.

knowledge of a particular culture. This last suggestion is simple, but seems to be often overlooked. A set of recommended interview questions follows this report.

Access the networks that are already present. For example, in my own situation, I can easily call several Korean pastors who are quite fluent in the Korean and English languages and well-versed in both cultures. They are invaluable resources for assessment. Nearby colleges with extensive Korean populations and student groups also offer assistance and seem more than willing to share successful approaches.

RESPONSE AND SUGGESTIONS

Lastly, I want to share some advice directly from Korean students. Three simple approaches are helpful. First, be aware of and admit that there are cultural differences. The adversarial response "You're in America now!" is rarely helpful. Learn the basics of another cultural group, particularly if there are several students from that same group. Appreciate the value of another person's viewpoint (America isn't the only country in the world). Be aware of your own ethnocentrism. Faculty (and other students) need to take time to actually get to know the foreign student.[7] "Just pay genuine attention," says one Korean. Listen to their stories and appreciate the rich diversity that is found. Simply acknowledging that there are differences is a positive step even if no particular action is taken.

Second, teacher modeling is a key to successfully helping Korean students learn in the American classroom. I have noticed that if I am patient and listen carefully if someone speaks slowly or in broken English, the student will often listen more actively also. When teaching,

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[7] Although not focused specifically on international students, personal interaction and one-on-one involvement appears to be the key to the success of the award-winning academic development program at West Chester University (Pennsylvania).

explain carefully what you are doing and why you are doing it. Be tolerant. Be patient. Listen more carefully and actively when someone with an accent or poor English skills is speaking. Respond in classes in plain English (and slow down).

Third, use several types of interaction activities. Variety assists all students, but can be especially helpful to the international student unfamiliar with the subtleties and nuances of American idioms and culture Display important or difficult information in more than one way. Make use of visual as well as verbal reinforcements. Help the student maximize learning by emphasizing individual strengths. It is not necessary to be absolutely accommodating to everyone, but some variety and flexibility in teaching methods certainly is beneficial to all. Think carefully through the contrasts presented in tables one to four. Do you see any of your students reflected in the styles on the right side column?

SOME HELPFUL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When you came here, what was your reaction to your first American class? How did you feel about the style and methods of presentation?

2. How is the classroom learning different between Korean and American classes? What have you done to adapt to this?

3. How do you react if you hear students call professor by their first name, or openly criticize, argue, and interrupt one another?

4. What do you do if a teacher asks you for your opinion or analysis of a particular problem? What about expressing viewpoints during classroom discussions? If there is an essay or paper, do you concentrate on the facts and information or on your own idea and opinions? Why? What difficulties have you encountered in writing a research paper?

5. Americans typically value independence of thought, competition, and "do it yourself" attitudes. Contrast this with the Korean emphasis on relationships with others, politeness, cooperation, harmony, respect, and "saving face." What advice would you give to teachers and fellow students?

6. What do you think about the tests and examinations? What kind of test do you prefer (essay, multiple choice, oral exam)? Why? What place does memorization play in your own way of learning? How do you study for an examination (i.e., group learning, individual preparation, memorization of textbooks, handouts, and lecture notes)? Do you like handouts? Should the professor use overheads and electronic presentations?

7. If someone gave you a really bad grade but you felt you should have a better grade, what would you do?

8. When you encounter difficult subjects with a lot of specialized vocabulary or new concepts (i.e., philosophy, science, economics, finance, technology) how did you prepare for these?

9. What advice would you give me to help me teach Korean students better - how can I help them learn? If you could, what would you change about the way American teaching and learning is done?

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